

Augustus: Caesar and god.

Varying Images of the first Roman Emperor

Jodie Martyndale-Howard

The University of Nottingham

WHY is it that Rome's first Emperor can be seen to adorn Egyptian art and architecture as Pharaoh throughout the province? How might the context of such images help our understanding of the population make-up and reasons behind such portrayals? These are the questions I wish to answer through exploring the varying images of the first Roman emperor.

Whenever Augustus is mentioned images of power such as the Prima Porta are first to come to our minds.¹ As one of the most well-known Imperial statues it is often our first thought regarding portraits of the young, militarily successful leader of the Roman world. It is this image which has been seen throughout modern scholarship as the epitome of the traits Augustus wished his subjects to see, and therefore the one which resonates most strongly in our minds as the defining image of the emperor.²

Yet various scholars who address provincial images pay little or no attention to Egypt and the array of portrayals available.³ This may be because of the peculiar nature of Egypt: for some Classicists, it is Egyptologists who should be researching the images and wrestling with the complex iconographic system that had developed through centuries of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic rule; the other side believe it to be the remit of Classicists, who can use such images to understand how the province was ruled. It therefore straddles an uncomfortable – though entirely artificial – division in academic approaches.

With thanks to Will Leveritt for the rendition of the cartouches (fig. 5).

¹For the purposes of this paper, references to Augustus also include the time up to 27 BC when he was still known as Octavian.

²Beard and Henderson 2001, 222.

³Erika Simon 1986 or Paul Zanker 1990.

Prior studies on portraits often give little attention to Egypt;⁴ this paper distinguishes itself from the few prior studies by laying a greater emphasis on the importance of context. By looking at not just what the iconography of Augustus portrays, but where it comes from and who could have created it, I hope to show the need for context when examining these visual representations.

When thinking about Egypt's art and architecture, iconic postcard vistas come to mind. We see pyramids, vast temple complexes with giant columns and colossal statues covered in hieroglyphs. What is often forgotten in our stereotypical view of Egypt is how much of the remaining temples were actually built not by the Pharaohs of old but by the Ptolemies and Romans, who extended and recycled the traditional temples.⁵ This, coupled with Egypt's new status within the empire as a province of the Roman people,⁶ creates an ideal setting to explore how the new regime would interact with its subjects.

Before we continue, a word concerning Egyptian art and religion as well as its position within the Roman Empire is needed to be able to fully understand the context of the imagery discussed below.

Egypt was ruled for centuries by Pharaohs who were responsible for maintaining *maat* (world order).⁷ To maintain this the Pharaoh interacted with the gods so that the cosmos would not collapse.⁸ This placed the Pharaoh at the centre of Egyptian life, not just religion. The conquering of Egypt by Alexander and the Ptolemies had created a 'double-faced' outlook:⁹ there was the continued presence of the 'traditional Egyptian' Pharaoh of old, with the emergence of the new Hellenistic ruler cult. This mix of traditions, coupled with Egypt's new status within the Roman Empire from 30 BC as a province,¹⁰ made for a time for of both continuity and change.

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Free standing sculpture

So were Pharaonic images of Augustus the norm? When looking at the Meroë Head (which is on display in the British Museum in London, IN 1911,0901.1), the answer would seem to be no.¹¹ Found in modern day Sudan, it was originally set up in Egypt and taken during an Ethiopian raid at some point between 25 to 21 BC.¹² Here we see a 'typical' portrait of the emperor.

Made of bronze, the Meroë head originates from a full length statue. The glass eyes stare back past the viewer, and above his right eye the distinctive pincer shape can be seen, showing the emperor in the Prima Porta type. His lips are together and turn slightly down, and his ears protrude out from the sides of the head. The head leans slightly to the right although there is no sign of tension in the neck muscles.

⁴Leading works in this area include: Bowman 1986; Dundas 1994; Dundas 2002; Holbl 2000; Holbl 2004; Porter and Moss 1951; Porter and Moss 1970.

⁵Finnestad 1998, 185–186; Arnold 1999, 143–144.

⁶*Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 27.

⁷Brewer and Teeter 1999, 86.

⁸Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 202.

⁹Koenen 1993, 29.

¹⁰Capponi 2005, 10.

¹¹For reference see under this [link](#).

¹²Walker and Burnett 1981, 22.

There are some obvious Hellenistic traits visible, particularly the tilt of the head, almost a moment of *pathos*.¹³ This leaves the question of why such an image can be found within Egypt, where Pharaonic images were the norm. It has been suggested that the statue could have originally been set up in a temple to the imperial cult.¹⁴ This would therefore suggest a Hellenistic form of monarchy. Ptolemy I Soter set up a cult to Alexander in Alexandria in around 29 BC which formed the basis of the Ptolemaic dynastic cult.¹⁵ This, coupled with the knowledge that the *Caesareum* which was started under Cleopatra VII was dedicated under Augustus, would suggest that such a cult existed; the Hellenising influence increases the likelihood that such images would have been set up.¹⁶ This would also suggest that such a cult existed in both Upper and Lower Egypt. This image of Augustus can therefore be seen as a continuation of the ruling Ptolemaic dynastic cult, and although Augustus may not have set this precise statue up, the evidence points to the emperor wishing to adopt the local traditions.

Images 1, 2 and 3 are all easily recognisable as Tiberius, Augustus, and Livia. They originate from Fayum (Arsinoe) and were found together in the theatre complex of the town. They form part of a dynastic commemorative group, set up around 4 AD after the adoption of Tiberius.¹⁷

The Meroë Head is not the only example of a Roman/Hellenistic influenced portrait of Augustus in Egypt. Consider the three busts which can be seen on display at the Glyptotek in Copenhagen. In the marble bust of Augustus, his head faces to the right with his shoulders central, with the turning creating small signs of tension in the neck muscles. There is a single wrinkle on his forehead below the pincer shape hair. This group of busts again suggests Hellenistic influence on the portraiture of the Roman emperor. Once more we do not have the whole picture of the statues' context. There was no inscription found alongside the statues, so we do not know the circumstances of their erection. However some things we do know enable us to get closer to the statue's meaning. It is recognised that throughout provincial towns in Egypt, the imperial cult was not set up by Roman officials but by the local elite, who were trying to align themselves with the imperial family.¹⁸ Therefore they represent very public display, not only of the adoption of Tiberius, but of a magnate accepting this adoption, and recognising that Tiberius will become ruler after Augustus. Given that these images originate from Fayum, perhaps it is not that surprising that they are Romanised, especially when one considers the most famous examples of art from this region, the mummy portraits.

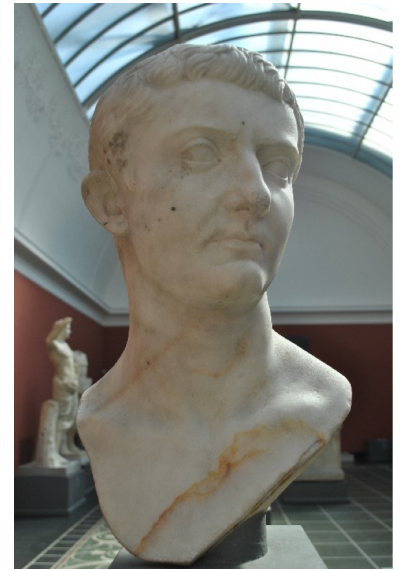


Fig. 1: Head of Tiberius; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

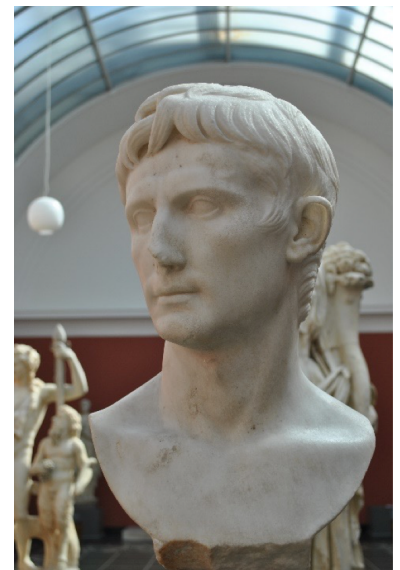


Fig. 2: Head of Augustus; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

¹³For detailed discussion of Hellenistic ruler portraiture, see Smith 1988.

¹⁴Walker and Burnett 1981, 22.

¹⁵Koenen 1993, 46. 50; Fraser 1972.

¹⁶Pfeiffer 2012, 86.

¹⁷Rose 1997, 188.

¹⁸Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 251.



Fig. 3: Head of Livia; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek.
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.



Fig. 4: Unknown Pharaoh, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

This perhaps reflects the make-up of the society at Fayum, and suggests a Greco-Roman population rather than Egyptian. So far these two cases have highlighted what one would expect to see: Romanised images of the first emperor, along with his family. These types of portrait can be found all over the empire.

It is at this point in my discussion where Egypt takes a unique turn. For example, the full-length statue of Augustus from Karnak is an example of hybrid iconography.¹⁹ There is considerable academic debate as to whether this is Augustus or an earlier Ptolemy, as many think it is hard to distinguish by looking at the hair alone, but the general consensus is that there is enough of the Prima Porta hair type visible to conclude this is Augustus.²⁰ The statue is made from granite and is over life size at 2.80 m.²¹ Looking at the statue in detail, it is easy to see its Egyptian influences. He wears the *nemes* cloth headdress with the *uraeus* (snake) in the centre, both of which denote the statue as being a Pharaoh. Further down, he wears the traditional Egyptian kilt, the *shendyt* with his hands clenching folded cloth besides it. He strides out towards the viewer, left foot forward. In contrast to the sculptures already seen, the sculpting technique is different here.

The figure is not completely free standing but is still part of the original block. At the sculpture of Augustus from Karnak the headdress is carved before the block is left in place. It is also the reason why there are no supports for the arms and legs, as the limbs are not separated from the block. By comparison with the head of the unknown Pharaoh from the 13th–17th Dynasty (roughly 1700–1600 BC) on display in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek there is a distinct difference; that of the appearance of hair.

The statue, although heavily damaged, shows the Pharaoh wearing the *nemes* with *uraeus* but with marked difference in the visibility of the hair. It is this hair style which has helped to identify the main statue as Augustus. Hair appearing underneath the headdress is also something that does not appear on earlier Egyptian statues and developed through the reigns of the Ptolemies.²² The Pharaohs' face is rounded without being chubby, his eyes are large and defined whilst his ears are large and protruding. The two statues bear very little resemblance to each other. The distinctiveness of the face is striking. Nevertheless, it is clear that by following the traditional style in terms of *clothing* and *symbolism*, Augustus is portrayed as Pharaoh. As to whether he was thought of as Pharaoh, we cannot draw certain conclusions from one statue. It is here that comparative material needs to be introduced, such as titles and differing portrayal methods.

¹⁹Image can be seen under www.arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/objekt/53700.

²⁰Kleiner 2005, 146, suggests that the statue does not portray Augustus, as does Walker and Higgs 2001, 146; Holbl 2000, 12; Stanwick 2002, 61; Borg 2012, 615 agree the statue portrays Augustus.

²¹Holbl 2000, 12.

²²Stanwick 2002, 33.

Temple reliefs are among the most widely recognised forms of Egyptian art. In some cases they adorn every surface of a temple's walls, columns and ceiling. A common misconception is that temple building and decoration ceased during the Imperial period. However, there is evidence of large scale building works funded by the emperors.²³

The images are too numerous to include within one article, and show Augustus as a traditional Pharaoh, wearing a variety of different headdresses and offering varying things to gods and goddesses including Isis, Sekhmet, Osiris, Horus and Thoth.²⁴

I wish to draw attention to what are perhaps some of the most interesting political images. They originate from the Temple of Kalabsha, which was heavily expanded during the reign of Augustus, and come from a procession which follows the pharaoh from leaving the palace, through ritual purification, to crowning. Its oldest parts date from c. 30 BC.²⁵ The gateway is currently on display in Berlin as part of the Staatliche Museum in the Sammlung Scharfgerstenberg collection, as it was gifted to Germany following the building of the Aswan Dam, where the temple would have been submerged so was subsequently moved to a new location.²⁶

The first image I wish to discuss originates from the temple at Kalabsha. It can be found on the outer vestibule, North wall, on the third register. In the scene, the Pharaoh is identified as Augustus through the appearance of his Horus name in the register below the scene. He can be seen in the centre being purified by the gods Horus and Thoth. Both gods are easily identifiable through their anthropomorphic representations, with the Eagle and Ibis head respectively. In the centre Augustus wears a cap, with *uraeus* as well as false beard and necklace. His chest is bare and he wears the traditional *shendyt*. This ritual purification forms part of a wider scene that shows the stages of being crowned as Pharaoh from leaving the palace to purification and to being crowned.²⁷ This is a clear attempt by the local priest to legitimise Augustus as the Pharaoh. A further relief from the Kalabsha temple shows the Pharaoh being crowned by Buto and Nehkabet. It can be found on the North Wall of the Naos in the lower register.²⁸

Augustus wears the *pschent*, the double crown which represents the union of Upper and Lower Egypt. This scene is also carved on the temple of Isis at Philae where once more the emperor is crowned by Buto and Nehkabet, with Isis watching on.²⁹ These images should not be seen in isolation but as part of a schema. Here, as tradition had dictated for centuries, the gods legitimise the position of the Pharaoh – even though it is well documented that Augustus was never officially crowned as such.³⁰

²³ Arnold 1999, 226; Finnestad 1998, 185.

²⁴ For further discussion and images of Augustus as Pharaoh on temple reliefs see Holbl 2000, Chapter 1; Holbl 2004; for a description of all of the reliefs including Augustus see Porter and Moss 1951; Porter and Moss 1970.

²⁵ Shaw and Nicholson 2008, 164.

²⁶ Hawass 2004, 40.

²⁷ Holbl 2004, 123.

²⁸ See Holbl 2004, 124.

²⁹ Holbl 2004, 79.

³⁰ Herklotz 2012, 13.

Scholars have considered such images as these to be merely ceremonial and part of the need for iconographic representation, without the Egyptian people or even priests believing that Augustus was legitimately seen as a Pharaoh.³¹ However such images are not rare. Hundreds of images of Augustus can be found on temple walls, alongside representations of later Roman emperors who followed suit in being crowned Pharaoh. This coupled with the existence of the other types of images found throughout Egypt suggest that such conclusions look at these representations in isolation.

Images of the ritual of crowning are not the only type to adorn temple walls. A scene once more from Kalabsha, this time the North wall of the Sanctuary, depicts Augustus. He can be identified by his cartouches, and appears to be offering *maat* to Osiris-Onnophris, Isis, and Nephthys, all of whom are to the left of the carving.³²

Behind Augustus is a female consort with no name. It is often stated that Augustus' position as Pharaoh did not extend to Livia, and she is not seen as consort in any temple relief.³³ This may be true, but it leaves us with a mysterious figure. A relief from Dendera shows depicting Caesarion and Cleopatra.³⁴

This is comparable to a relief of Cleopatra and Caesareon from Dendera in which Cleopatra can be seen to be wearing the same double plume head-dress as Augustus' consort. Hannestad suggests that this is Augustus changing the canon so as to not defeat his own objectives of maintaining the appearance of *primus inter pares*.³⁵

Could it then be possible that Augustus himself, or perhaps his advisers, had a hand in deciding that his status did not extend to Livia. I believe that this relief is from early in Augustus' reign, in which the original figures were carved under Caesarion and Cleopatra, before being finished under Augustus. This would allow for the mysterious female consort, whilst still validating that Livia's position was never legitimised as Queen by the priesthood or by Augustus himself.

One of the hardest things to ascertain with images on temples is exactly who set them up and why. Augustus funded huge temple building programs throughout Egypt, and this may well have influenced some priests' decisions to include the emperor on relief panels. However, the vast quantity of panels and variety within them would suggest this is more than just a simple solution. There are many reliefs depicting the emperor where his cartouche is not filled in, but instead left blank as can be seen in various

scenes from the Kalabsha Gate in Berlin (fig. 5).³⁶ This may show how he was seen to fulfil the needed role of Pharaoh, but was not legitimised completely, which would fit with the suggestion that the priesthood needed Augustus to maintain *maat*.

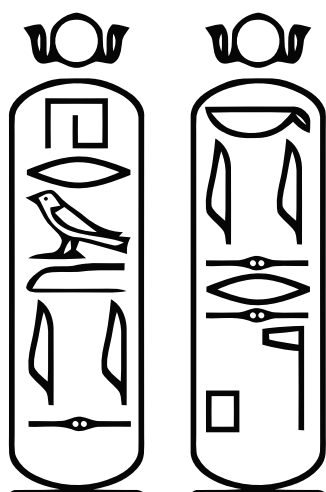


Fig. 5: The Roman and Caesar the God Cartouches from Kalabsha Gate. Image by William Leveritt.

³¹For discussions see Minas-Nerpel 2012, 376; Brewer and Teeter 1999, 86; and Dundas 2002, 434.

³²Holbl 2004, 128.

³³Kleiner 2005, 190.

³⁴Kleiner 2005, 86.

³⁵Hannestad 1988, 39.

³⁶See also the Buchis Stele below, for further discussion of empty cartouches.

To do this Augustus needed to fulfil this role by interacting with the gods in one of the traditional ways; through the iconography of temple walls. This fits with the situation at the start of Augustus' reign, where other cartouches simply recognise him as 'the Roman,' before we find 'Caesar' later on.³⁷ Several relief panels from the Kalabsha Gate shows the use of both of these cartouches next to each other.³⁸

I believe that Augustus was seen as a legitimate Pharaoh by the priests and people of Egypt, not just because he was needed to fulfil a religious role, but because it was a natural progression from the Ptolemies.³⁹ Although it took time to fully integrate Augustus within the system, the changing relationship shown by the cartouches used in temple reliefs highlights the legitimising of his position as Pharaoh, even if his foreign origins were routinely noted.

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Relief images of the emperor as Pharaoh are not limited to temple walls but can be found on stelae. Figure 6 shows the stele which is on display in the Glyptotek in Copenhagen, and figure 7 shows a close up of Augustus. The stele is one of two of Augustus from the Bucheum in Armant (the Buchis Bull was one of the sacred Bull cults), in which the Pharaoh in the top register can be seen wearing the *pschent* and triangular kilt, offering three reeds to the creature.⁴⁰ The reeds signify the fields and are a symbol of the prosperity of Egypt through the produce of the river Nile.⁴¹

The register below contains the hieroglyphic inscription. It is the latter which enabled us to identify Augustus as the pharaoh, through the dating (the cartouche is empty, as can be seen from fig. 8). Cassius Dio tells us that Augustus refused to worship the Apis Bull on his visit to Memphis is 30 BC as θεοὺς ἅλλ' οὐχὶ βοῦς προσκυνεῖν εἰθίσθαι.⁴² Why is it that we have the Roman emperor, who worships the Roman gods, being associated with an obscure Egyptian cult?⁴³

The stelae were set up by the priest on the Bull's death, yet openly Augustus did not approve of such worship.⁴⁴ This could be seen in isolation, as the continuation of tradition by a small group of dedicated people to the Buchis Bull and old religion. Yet even if this were true, it should not be taken for granted.

Stelae



Fig. 6: Buchis Bull Stelae, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

³⁷ Herklotz 2012, 14.

³⁸ These mean 'the Roman' and 'Caesar the God' and can be seen on many reliefs of the Kalabsha, including the gateway. See further Holbl 2004, 13.

³⁹ There is debate as to whether the Ptolemies were seen fully as successors to the Pharaohs as they created both Egyptian and Greek inspired art; for discussion see Koenen 1993, 38; Stanwick 2002, 1–2. 33–35; Pollitt 2006, 250–262; Arnold 1999, 143–154.

⁴⁰ Mond and Myers 1934b, 11–14, inscription images on Plate XLIII.

⁴¹ Owusu 2000, 241.

⁴² Cass. Dio LI 16.5: "for he was accustomed to worshipping gods not cattle".

⁴³ It is noted that the Romans did amalgamate foreign cults into their religious schema including the Egyptian goddess Isis.

⁴⁴ Pollini 2008, 187 discusses how Augustus neither banned nor stopped Egyptians from portraying him worshipping anthropomorphic gods.



Fig. 7: Buchis Bull Stelae, detail
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.



Fig. 8: Close up of empty Cartouche
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

Stelae at the site are found up to the reign of Diocletian, all of which show the Roman emperor as Pharaoh.⁴⁵ This makes it clear that to a portion of society, who still worshipped the traditional gods, Augustus was Pharaoh, or at least fulfilling the role of Pharaoh by maintaining the cosmos. The slightly cruder sculpted stele from Fayum in the Louvre shows Augustus offering incense to Sobek, Hershef and Isis.⁴⁶

He wears the *Atef* crown with the horns of the god Knemu, and is carved in the same way as the temple depictions and stelae above, with torso and shoulders facing the viewer and the rest of the body in profile. Once more the emperor is fulfilling the traditional role of Pharaoh. Of more utility in understanding his role in society however is the Greek inscription underneath, where he is named as *Autocrator Kaisor*. Here we have both a Pharaoh and emperor.

The Greek inscription sheds light onto those most likely to be carving and viewing the stele, and fits with the population makeup of Fayum discussed earlier. This stele is not the only one from near Fayum to use traditional Egyptian iconography coupled with a Greek inscription, as can be seen from the Stele of Isis Esenkhebis (fig. 9).

It is clear that Fayum was populated at least with some people who could read Greek, most likely immigrants, who had brought their own culture and amalgamated it with the local traditions. This amalgamation means that traditional iconography to maintain the cosmos could continue whilst the inscriptions were used for interpretation. This also fits with Augustus' position as Egyptian Pharaoh and being known as *Autocrator* and *Kaisor*, two of the commonly used names for Augustus within cartouches, and therefore the depictions above show Augustus fulfilling the traditional role as Pharaoh in a way in which all of the population of Egypt could understand.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Mond and Myers 1934a, 23.

⁴⁶ Arveiller et al. 2012, 50.

⁴⁷ Herklotz 2012, 14, see also the cartouche in fig. 5.

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When looking at all of this evidence above (which is highly selective in its scope), it is safe to say that Augustus was seen by the majority of the population as Pharaoh. His appearance all over Egypt in traditional and non-traditional materials and motifs shows his peculiar position within the hierarchy of Egypt. As sole leader, he is recognised as both Egyptian and Roman, from state sponsored reliefs, local priests and local magnates. This unique positioning can be seen to show Augustus' ability to adapt his iconography to local idiom, creating another example of the shrewdness of Rome's first emperor.

Summary



Fig. 9: Stelae of Isis Esenkhebis, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
Photographer: Jodie Martyndale-Howard.

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Abbreviations of ancient authors and texts are according to The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

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